

### Let's Talk! ESL Students' Needs and Writing Centre Philosophy

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*When university/college faculty members believe that ESL students' writing skills are not equivalent to those of native speakers, they frequently send these ESL students to their institution's writing centres (WCs). However, this often results in frustration for WC staff, the students, and faculty members. This article first describes ESL students' language-learning backgrounds and expectations, as well as WCs' still-evolving philosophy and practices, to demonstrate that ESL students visiting WCs are still often caught between two opposing educational frameworks. The article then offers possible solutions and discusses the importance of initiating dialogue among ESL instructors, ESL students, WC staff, and university/college professors.*

*Quand les professeurs au collège ou à l'université croient que la compétence en rédaction des étudiants en ALS n'est pas équivalente à celle des locuteurs natifs, ils les envoient souvent aux centres de rédaction de leur institution. Il en résulte souvent de la frustration de la part du personnel des centres, des étudiants et des professeurs. Cet article débute par une description des antécédents et des attentes des étudiants en ALS d'une part, et des pratiques et de la philosophie en évolution des centres de rédaction d'autre part, de sorte à démontrer que les étudiants qui vont aux centres de rédaction se retrouvent encore souvent coincés entre deux cadres pédagogiques en opposition. Cet article offre des solutions possibles et discute l'importance d'amorcer un dialogue entre les enseignants en ALS, les étudiants en ALS, le personnel des centres de rédaction et les professeurs aux niveaux collégial et universitaire.*

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As the number of non-native English-speaking/international/ESL/ELL/EAL<sup>1</sup> students registering at Canadian and United States postsecondary institutions increases, so does the number of support systems put in place for them in these institutions. For example, when today's faculty members believe that ESL students' writing skills are not equivalent to those of native English-speaking students, they frequently send these ESL students to their institution's writing centres (WCs) for help.

Unfortunately, depending on the context, ESL students who visit US and Canadian WCs may find themselves caught between two opposing – or at least divergent – educational frameworks. On the one hand, EFL teaching practices,

which are frequently imparted in large, teacher-centered classrooms, often focus on form before content (Harris & Silva, 1993). As a result, many ESL students (along with their university/college professors) believe that learning spoken and written English involves mastering the language's grammar; accordingly, they prioritize feedback on grammatical issues (Leki, 1991). Such beliefs in the effectiveness of this type of corrective feedback (Diab, 2005) often lead both students and their university/college professors to view WCs as "grammar repair shops." On the other hand, when ESL students approach WCs for help with their grammar, they are met with a still-evolving WC philosophy and another conceptual framework. WC tutors, who usually work one-on-one with students, are often instructed to look at texts globally and to verify that students understand the broader components of their assignments before repairing grammatical errors (North, 1984). It is true that a number of scholars (Boquet & Lerner, 2008; Bruce & Rafoth, 2009; North; Severino, Swenson, & Zhu, 2009) have identified the challenges and needs of ESL students in WCs and stated that initial pedagogical ideals may no longer be achievable or practical in today's much internationalized writing centres. However, writing centres are notoriously context-dependent and diverse in their training and tutoring practices, and a number of them are still based on North's (1984) model. Bell and Elledge (2008), for example, still describe the tutors participating in their study as having been taught that "their sessions should focus on the writing process and the writer" (p. 21), not on editing or other local issues. They explain, "This hierarchy follows common writing center practice and theories of writing pedagogy" (p. 21).

This ongoing conflict between ESL students' expectations and WCs' theoretical foundations and current practices form the overarching theme of this article. As the discussion of existing literature and research reveals, ESL students possess a set of learning skills and expectations that are often at odds with academic writing and WC philosophy. Meanwhile, the current and omnipresent pedagogical WC model, developed in the 1970s with native speakers of English in mind, has been slowly evolving in the right direction for the last 10 years, but is still often unable to address the needs of growing numbers of ESL students.

The objectives of this article are as follows: (a) to discuss how ESL support systems preparing students for and supporting them through postsecondary education could positively influence their academic preparation, expectations, and experience; (b) to provide a better understanding of how WCs everywhere could continue to catch up with the latest theory and research to improve their responses to ESL students' needs; and (c) to demonstrate the importance of initiating dialogue among ESL instructors, ESL students, WC tutors and directors, and university/college professors.

In order to explore these issues, I first summarize some of the literature that supports my assertion that ESL students possess a set of learning skills and expectations that are still often at odds with the traditional WC phi-

losophy adopted by most writing centres. Next, I describe the principles on which WC philosophy is based and how this framework is evolving today. Finally, I attempt to begin a conversation and provide some suggestions for ESL instructors, university/college teachers/professors, WC tutors and directors, and, ultimately, ESL students.

## **ESL Students' Background**

ESL students in Canadian and US colleges and universities come from diverse educational backgrounds and often have dissimilar language skills (Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Harris & Silva, 1993) despite the institutions' entrance requirements (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS) established by colleges and universities to ensure some homogeneity in language skills. Some students learn English in primary and/or secondary school or in university in their countries of origin and then take an exam such as the TOEFL to gain admission to English-language universities. Others come to Canada or the US with poor or limited English skills and attend ESL intensive courses to prepare for the linguistic requirements of academia. Still others are first- or second-generation immigrants who might speak one language at home and English in school (see below and Cummins, 1979, for more details on the communication skills of these students and the development of basic interpersonal communication skills and cognitive academic language proficiency).

Factors such as affective variables, first language, age, language practice, educational levels, motivation, and sociocultural variables also influence students' language-learning skills, experiences, strategies, and attitudes toward writing, as well as their learning styles (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Gradman & Hanania, 1991; Qian & Krugly-Smolksa, 2008; Reid, 1987). For example, not all students will have received extensive writing instruction in their first language, let alone in academic writing and non-product-oriented writing, and their attitudes toward writing in a second language (L2) might need to be challenged or constructed (Ismail et al., 2010; Petric, 2002). Similarly, many ESL students are unaware of or unfamiliar with the writing requirements, stylistic conventions, and specific genres used in their academic discipline (Angelova & Riazantseva).

Whatever their educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, most ESL students entering US or Canadian colleges and universities today have learned English in skill-based courses by means of rote memorization, practice in the use of grammatical rules, and a strong focus on language accuracy (Cheng et al., 2010). As Qian and Krugly-Smolksa (2008) write about the Chinese participants in their study,

The formation of [the belief that the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences is an important indicator of good writing skills] can be traced back to their experiences of learning English as a foreign



language in China. Grammar-focused teaching and learning activities can lead students to pay particular attention to specific details at the sentence level. (p. 77)

Few EFL teachers are successful in implementing less traditional teaching methods (such as content-based instruction), mainly because of inadequate teacher preparation and a mismatch between the new practices and curricular demands, as well as student resistance (Cheng et al.).

Because many ESL students see their writing difficulties in terms of problems with form rather than with content (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006), and because their educational system emphasizes the authority of teachers and tutors (Bell & Youmans, 2006; Powers, 1993), ESL students have a strong preference for authoritative linguistic feedback (from teachers and WC tutors). In fact, ESL students often expect this type of feedback to the point that instructors and teachers (and by extension, WC tutors) often lose credibility in students' eyes if they do not provide it (Bitchener & Ferris, 2011; Diab, 2005; Ferris, 1995, 2002; Lee, 2005). These students may also lack appropriate writing strategies and resources, not understand how to learn the language efficiently, and be unfamiliar with their teachers' (and by extension, WC tutors') expectations (Chang & Swales, 1999). Given this situation, it is not surprising that when WC tutors ask, "How can I help you today?" most ESL students coming to WCs, whether they come because their teachers sent them or because they realize that they need help, respond, "Please fix my grammar."

## Writing Centre Philosophy

In 2009, less than two years after I had become a WC director, I delivered my first presentation about ESL clients<sup>2</sup> at the annual TESOL Convention. Surprisingly, no sooner had I started to talk about WCs than individuals in the audience began demanding to know what was so wrong about helping ESL students with their grammar. I was even asked how I could sleep at night with the knowledge that I was forcing ESL students to pay expensive editors instead of helping them free of charge in my WC. This event helped me to recognize the "cultural" gap that existed and still exists today between practices in ESL programs and those in writing centres.<sup>3</sup>

In the US and Canada, WCs are dynamic places that are strongly shaped by their individual contexts. WCs exist in small and large universities and colleges, housed in departments, faculties, student services, learning centres, or academic skills units. Some are staffed by professional writers or faculty members, whereas others make use of paid or volunteer graduate and/or undergraduate students (often called *tutors* or *consultants*). Some WCs serve only students, others serve faculty and staff as well, and still others are open to members of the community at large. With these institutional and struc-

tural differences come significant funding variations, as well as diversity in staffing and management.

Despite these many differences, certain shared principles govern WC work. First, WCs are places where all clients are welcome to receive free advice in a safe and pressure-free environment that favors a collaborative approach to instruction, because tutors do not assign grades to their clients' papers (Brooks, 1991; Lunsford, 1991). It is believed that all readers and writers benefit from freely sharing ideas with other writers and readers and engaging in meaningful discussions (Harris & Silva, 1993).

Second, ever since the 1970s, the main philosophy underlying tutor training and how tutoring sessions are conducted has been, as North (1984) explains, "to produce better writers, not better writing" (p. 38). Gillespie and Lerner (2000) add that WC tutors "don't fix texts; we teach writers how to fix texts. We don't tell writers what to write; we ask questions about and react as readers to what writers have already written or are thinking of writing" (p. 22). In fact, minimalist tutoring (Brooks, 1995) is often encouraged in order to emphasize the importance of the writers' ownership of their texts. As a result, tutors will not "edit" clients' texts, because clients must maintain ownership of their own writing. It is also believed that plagiarism can be best avoided by looking at higher-order concerns (e.g., organization, argumentation, the handling of evidence) rather than focusing on lower-order concerns (e.g., grammar, syntax, punctuation).

Third, in agreement with composition theorists who see writing as a process and thus suggest that writers should focus on higher-order concerns (such as organization and development of arguments) and be concerned with form only at the end of the writing process, many WC scholars favor the stance that grammatical accuracy should not be prioritized during tutoring sessions (Bell & Elledge, 2008; Gillespie & Lerner, 2000).

As a result of these theories, WC tutors often try to engage clients by using an enquiry-based method (asking questions rather than giving answers, which should enable clients to discover alternative solutions) until the clients are able to make educated choices about their texts. This non-directive approach requires clients to understand and agree with the philosophy behind WC practices and to participate fully in the writing process in order to produce texts that are fully their own. Furthermore, these WC principles allow clients to recognize their strengths and weaknesses and to see writing as a broader skill that they can continue to improve (North, 1984).

Regrettably, this tutoring philosophy also has unintended consequences: ESL students who go to WCs in hopes of finding help with a difficult language and who specifically need feedback on what WC culture tends to regard as lower-order concerns may feel structurally excluded. As Bell and Elledge (2008) explain,

tutors often experience dissonance when working with ELL students because they feel tension between what the student wants out of the session, which is often help with surface features and grammar, and what the tutors have been trained to address, which is process orientation and global issues. (p. 19)

## Discussion

Below I outline suggestions that may benefit everyone involved in the academic success of ESL students, both before they go to college/university and once they begin their postsecondary studies. Many instructors/professors and writing centres may already be implementing some of the practices I suggest below, but I believe that the most important practice one can adopt is to raise awareness of these issues and to discuss them with colleagues, staff, and students.

### *ESL and University Instructors/Professors*

First, we need to remember that instructors and professors all have unique expectations and standards. Furthermore, these instructors might not know how to help their ESL students, or they might lack the time or desire to do so. As one of Angelova and Riazantseva's (1999) professors said in an interview, "My philosophy is that it's not my job to teach [ESL students] to write, I'm not a writing instructor. If they have major problems, they should take a writing course, hire a tutor or get an editor" (p. 509). However, instructors and professors should be aware of and never dismiss students' expectations, practices, comfort zone, and attitudes toward language-learning and academic writing. They must also express their expectations clearly and help students to understand feedback on formal aspects of their writing (Petric, 2002). Even writing/composition teachers might not know how to deal effectively with ESL students' errors. As Ferris (2002) states, "It is important to acknowledge that unless writing teachers specifically make the effort to prepare themselves to deal with student errors, they may do so less effectively than they should" (p. 57). A statement by the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC, 2009) recommends that all university/college writing teachers learn about "second language writing theory, research, and instruction" (online) and be prepared to work with ESL writers.<sup>4</sup>

Angelova and Riazantseva (1999) offer various strategies for supporting ESL students throughout their academic lives. First, they urge instructors and tutors to make students aware of potential writing differences and difficulties and to provide them with genre-specific writing instruction and support at the beginning of their studies, *before* they start struggling. Second, they suggest that faculty members advise and support students throughout their studies; and finally, they advise all stakeholders to keep open at all times the lines of communication between faculty members and students



(and by extension, writing centres). Writing centres can easily fit in this arrangement by providing writing workshops (with topics ranging from the terminology and organization of field-specific papers to expectations regarding standards and format), by offering individualized support to both ESL students and professors and by ensuring that all parties are aware of one another's expectations and responsibilities. Writing centres can also offer ESL students direction and instructions that teachers and professors might not know how to provide or have the time to offer such as guidance on the writing process and rhetorical differences. Simpson's (2006) study seems to suggest that with adequate and positive guidance, it is possible to transform positively ESL students' opinions about the pedagogical effects of form-based and content-based feedback.

As to the value of grammar in writing instruction, there seem to be no right or wrong answers. Whereas some researchers argue that grammatical corrective feedback is indeed useful if provided properly (Bitchener & Ferris, 2011; Ellis, 2006), others maintain that students' writing does not benefit from this type of corrective feedback (Truscott, 1996). Yates and Kenkel (2002) claim that L2 writing instruction cannot be separated from language instruction, and Diab's (2005) study also suggests that surface-level (grammar) mistakes must be pointed out to students (if not corrected) to help them to notice their mistakes and realize that they need to work on improving their grammar. As Harris and Silva (1993) explain,

It's necessary to keep in mind that non-native speakers of a language (especially ones with lower levels of second language proficiency) simply don't have the intuitions about the language that native speakers do; that is, it is harder for them to recognize when something "sounds good." Therefore, in lieu of these intuitions, these students will have to rely on explicit rules to a certain extent. (p. 530)

In his article "Teaching Grammar as a Liberating Force," Cullen (2008) confirms that ESL writers can and must become aware of the gaps in their language use by working on real tasks and by comparing their language use with that of native speakers of English. This "comparing and noticing 'gaps' and differences [will] enable them to develop their proficiency and sensitivity in the target language to increasingly more advanced levels" (p. 224). The author explains that "without any grammar, the learner is forced to rely exclusively on lexis and the immediate context, combined with gestures, intonation and other prosodic and non-verbal features, to communicate his/her intended meanings" (p. 221). In Cullen's view, grammar allows the speaker to make fine distinctions of time, place, emotions, politeness, intimacy, and disapproval, for example, and so gives the speaker greater control over the communication of meaning, and ESL students must be able to explain this to writing centre staff.

Two other aspects of the language-learning process that ESL students need to be taught are how to talk about writing (not just their ideas, but the reasons underlying all the decisions they made while writing) and how to become better self-editors without having to rely on the assistance of others. Powers (1993) explains that students can no longer “appear to be insecure, to be abdicating responsibility for their texts” (p. 44) as they often do in writing centres. Instead, “just by acquiring a vocabulary to discuss their writing in English, second-language writers make a first step toward understanding and self-sufficiency” (p. 45). ESL students thus have to be told from the start that they will have to work twice as hard as native speakers of English to meet the expectations of their professors and that it is their responsibility to become competent writers in English. In order to do this, they need to become aware of their own strengths and weaknesses; to be continual and active learners of cultural, grammatical, and rhetorical conventions; to make informed decisions while writing; and to learn how to talk about these decisions with their instructors/professors and their writing centre tutors.

### *In the Writing Center*

In the writing centre, directors and tutors must seek and test how to respond constructively to students’ grammar-based expectations and knowledge with more grammar awareness and practice, while still acknowledging, explaining, and encouraging WC and composition theories and pedagogical practices (content-base feedback). For example, Zhou’s (2009) participants perceived verb tenses and forms as especially difficult grammatical aspects that they needed to improve; perhaps tutors could reduce ESL students’ anxiety by noting and quickly explaining some of the most common mistakes related to verb forms and tenses in students’ papers before moving on to larger issues. Interestingly, some of Zhou’s participants wanted to improve their overall grammar skills, but did not know how to do so. Writing centre tutors could both follow writing centre philosophy *and* fulfill these students’ needs by offering self-editing techniques (e.g., keeping a list of difficult phrasal verbs that are commonly used, or making a list of errors/problems that recur in their texts) and suggesting language-learning foci that would be relevant to content (e.g., purpose and structure of a thesis statement, organization and development of arguments, focused introductions and conclusions), as well as form.

At the same time, it seems important to tell ESL students that writing skills are acquired, not innate, and to explain to them why they may receive more feedback on content than on form in the writing centre. Careful explanations can help students understand that their language skills must improve if they are to meet their professors’ expectations and that feedback on form *alone* is not useful (although form cannot, of course, be ignored). Students can also be helped to understand how to use the formal feedback that they



receive from professors (Diab, 2005). Even if some students are unfamiliar with and resistant to content-focused teaching (Cheng et al., 2010), they need to become aware of their own expectations and practices and of the limited effectiveness of their exclusive desire for feedback on form (Petric, 2002).

Tutors also “need to tell ESL writers that it is unrealistic for them to expect to be able to write like native speakers of English—especially when it comes to the small but persistent problems like articles and prepositions” (Harris & Silva, 1993, p. 531). This is not to say that students should be told that it is acceptable to make mistakes, but rather that they should not despair when facing discouraging and overwhelming negative feedback. Tutors should communicate clearly why feedback and expectations might be different in the classroom and in the WC (Petric, 2002) and demonstrate explicitly how students can reconcile these practices to improve both content and form.

Bell and Elledge (2008) also suggest that tutors’ training should include discussions about the “anxiety and discomfort” (p. 28) tutors may face when helping ESL students; they explain that training “can help tutors prepare themselves for the tensions they will experience” (p. 29). However, I believe that this dissonance is neither necessary nor healthy. Talking about tension and anxiety suggests that a problem exists that needs to be dealt with. Also, addressing ESL writers as a special case in a single class session or one textbook chapter, as learning disabilities are presented in most tutor training courses and textbooks (Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 2007), is unproductive and discriminatory. ESL students in many colleges and universities are no longer the minority, and tutor training must include them as a normal and recurring part of the tutors’ work. Textbooks and other pedagogical tools need to be developed and tested in order to normalize WC practices with regard to ESL students and make them not the exception to the rule, but the focus of research-based and constructive best practices. For example, basic grammar rules and terminology, as well as key principles of second-language acquisition can be taught and discussed with tutors so that they gain a better understanding of the language-learning process and the unique writing difficulties that ESL students face. Tutors should understand that errors differ and that idiomatic expressions, for example, do not follow grammatical rules and must be taught and memorized. Thus although ESL students might be expected to memorize and apply grammar rules on their own (as WC philosophy might prescribe), tutors can also learn to become more comfortable with being both cultural and linguistic informants for ESL students (Powers, 1993) when faced with what Ferris (2002) calls “untreatable errors.” If writing teachers need to see themselves as second-language writing teachers (CCCC, 2009), then WC tutors should also see themselves as “both second language writing tutors and as second language tutors” (Severino & Deifell, 2011, p. 26).

Writing centres also need to hire trained ESL/multilingual/multicultural tutors, as well as skilled tutors of various ages and educational, linguistic,

racial, socioeconomic, religious, and sexual backgrounds: in short, tutors who thoroughly represent the diversity of their clients. Only then will the *them vs. us* awkwardness and tension disappear. CCCC's (2009) "Statement on second language writing and writers" explicitly says that "writing centers that hire multilingual tutors will have someone who can provide second language writing students with first-hand writing strategies as well as empathy." As Kiedaisch and Dinitz (2007) assert,

Through seeing diversity as an essential element of course design [and WC life in general] rather than an add-on, instruction can be planned from the start to meet the needs of a wide range of users, thus reaching more students more effectively and requiring fewer accommodations for individuals. (p. 50)

Finally, WCs are the ideal context for more research that seeks to develop our understanding of the connection between tutor interactions and revisions by ESL writers. Although current findings suggest a clear connection between the two, especially with respect to small-scale revision of sentence-level problems, stakeholders should continue to make an effort to fill the gaps in knowledge and understanding (Williams, 2002). Boquet and Lerner (2008) explain that North's concept of the writing centre has been "a galvanizing force for writing centers, but also one that has subsequently become an impediment to the scholarly moves for which he himself called" (p. 171): "to make writing centers work better for [all] the writers they serve" (North, 1984, p. 33). The gap between theory, research, and practice needs to be filled quickly.

## Conclusion

Matsuda (1998, 1999) explained that composition studies did not seem to have acknowledged the increase in international students in US institutions and were ignoring the body of research and pedagogical best practices offered by TESL practitioners. As Matsuda (1999) explained,

for more than 30 years, ESL specialists have been working to improve the institutional practices for ESL writers in second-language classrooms by incorporating insights from composition studies; it is time for composition specialists to learn from them in developing institutional practices that can meet the needs of an increasing number of ESL students in writing classrooms – and beyond. (p. 718)

I believe that a similar division still exists today between TESL/ESL and writing centres. This time, WCs have taken the first step, albeit only the first step, by starting to question older pedagogical frameworks and by learning from best practices in second-language teaching that can be adapted to serve the

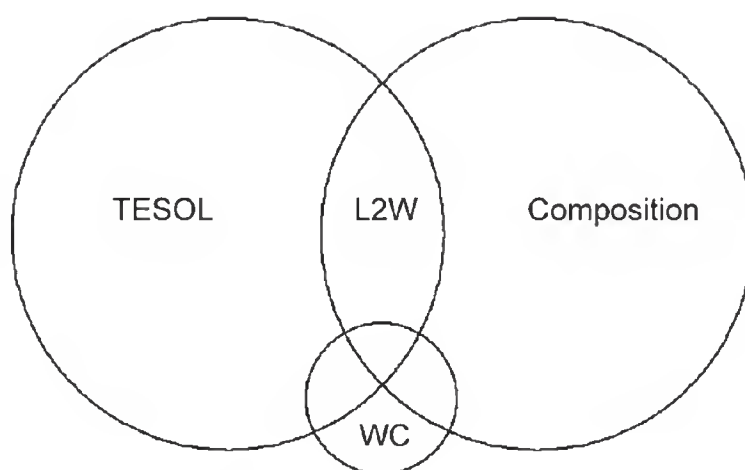


Figure 1. Model (based on Matsuda's (1998) model) linking writing centres to TESOL, L2W, and composition studies.

growing number of ESL students at North American colleges and universities. ESL instructors also need to learn about and from writing centre theories and practices and to have discussions about these with their students in order to prepare them more effectively for their academic studies. Only six (of more than 700) sessions offered at the 2013 TESOL convention were related to writing centre work.<sup>5</sup> Matsuda's (1998, 1999) calls have resulted in strong developments in the field of second-language writing (L2W), linking TESL and composition studies. Similarly, ESL programs, writing centres, L2W, and composition studies should also work more closely to learn from one another and to share knowledge. Above is my reinterpretation of Matsuda's (1998) model now showing the overlaps that exist between composition/writing studies and TESOL and including the comfortable space that WCs, TESOL, L2W, and composition should share.

In the end, ignoring, rejecting, or criticizing one another's methods and beliefs will not help our students become more successful writers in North American colleges and universities; understanding one another's perspectives and continuing the discussion with one another and with our students on how to integrate our methods more smoothly and efficiently can only benefit our students. Similarly, continued research in these fields (e.g., a large-scale survey of beliefs and practices across Canadian and US postsecondary writing centres) will further our collective goal: to examine the variables that affect our students' second-language learning and academic success.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The discussion on terminology for referring to these non-native English-speaking/international/ESL/EAL/ELL students is ongoing. *Non-Native English Speakers* (NNEs) is sometimes used, as well as *English Language Learners* (ELL), *Non-Native Speakers* (NNSs), and *English as an*



*Additional Language students* (EAL). “ESL” normally means *English as a Second Language* but is also known to mean *English as a Subsequent Language* in some circles. For the sake of space, I simply use ESL.

<sup>2</sup> Most WCs offer services to university students only, but a few WCs also offer services to staff and faculty members. Thus I use the term *clients* to avoid repeating “students, staff, and faculty members.”

<sup>3</sup> I could find only two articles that *mentioned* writing centres in the last five years of *TESOL Quarterly*. I also found only one preconvention institute and six (of 700+) sessions related to writing centres in the 2013 TESOL Convention program; in the International Writing Centers’ Association’s 2012 conference program, on the other hand, I found 18 (of 295) sessions related to ESL/ELL/international students.

<sup>4</sup> Bitchener and Ferris (2011) and Ferris and Hedgcock (2009) provide two easy introductions to ESL writing for writing/composition instructors.

<sup>5</sup> The 2009 TESOL presentation that I mention was part of a larger colloquium the focus of which was simply second-language writing; it was obvious that the audience did not expect to hear about writing centre work.

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